

VZCZCXRO4659
PP RUEHAG RUEHROV RUEHSR
DE RUEHCV #1777/01 3591351
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 241351Z DEC 08
FM AMEMBASSY CARACAS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2355
INFO RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHWH/WESTERN HEMISPHERIC AFFAIRS DIPL POSTS PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUMIAAA/HQ USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 001777

SIPDIS

HQSOUTHCOM ALSO FOR POLAD
DEPARTMENT PASS TO AID/OTI (RPORTER)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/22/2028
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: CHAVEZ'S PERPETUAL CAMPAIGN

CARACAS 00001777 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: A/POLITICAL COUNSELOR DANIEL LAWTON,
FOR REASON 1.4 (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Since taking office in 1999, President Chavez has engaged in frequent, polarizing electoral campaigns to both burnish his democratic credentials and accumulate personal power. The Venezuelan president's electoral focus has hindered his government's ability to address pressing social and economic issues. In the run-up to the proposed amendment referendum to remove presidential term limits, Chavez has intensified his aggressive rhetoric, suggesting that Venezuela is on the cusp of yet another major electoral decision that will determine the survival of both Chavez and his "revolution" or the "return of the oligarchs." The planned February or March 2009 amendment referendum will be the fifth since Chavez took power in 1999 and the thirteenth national election. Chavez's perpetual campaign strategy conveniently distracts public attention from Venezuela's accumulating problems and galvanizes his base. Nevertheless, Chavez's electoral setbacks in the last two elections suggest that Venezuelans increasingly distinguish between support for Chavez personally and for his policies. End Summary.

THE UPCOMING REFERENDUM

¶2. (C) Chavez has charged the National Assembly with authorizing a referendum on a proposed amendment to remove presidential term limits and allow his reelection in 2012 to a third, six-year term. The election, which Chavez has asked to be held on February 15, comes just three months after the conclusion of the November 2008 state and local elections and will be the thirteenth national election since he first came to power a decade ago. The November election had unusually high voter turn-out, including among middle-class voters. Nevertheless, political observers remarked that the campaign was the "coldest" in recent memory, despite Chavez's attempts to incite furor over allegations of an opposition- and US-backed coup plot and pledges to jail opposition leaders on corruption charges. Local polling indicated that the majority of Venezuelans did not believe Chavez's claims of a coup attempt.

ALL CHAVEZ, ALL THE TIME

¶3. (C) Chavez has increasingly sought to dominate public spaces with his image. The President intensified his abuse of obligatory "cadena" broadcasts in the weeks preceding the

November election to saturate the television and radio air waves for hours on a near daily basis. He used this tactic in previous campaigns, but to a lesser extent. Without even a firm election date for the prospective 2009 referendum, Chavez has continued using nightly "cadenas," bombarding his working-class supporters with justification for his amendment and threats that the survival of the "revolution" and its accompanying social programs rest with his winning the referendum.

14. (C) Chavez has historically framed elections as a plebiscite on him personally -- a tactic he is likely to continue given his relative popularity and the weakened state of other figures within Chavismo. Several of his key allies lost closely contested races, including Jesse Chacon for the mayorship of the Sucre Borough of Caracas and Diosdado Cabello in Miranda State. Although both subsequently received Cabinet positions, their electoral failures suggest they are unlikely to be effective -- or trusted -- on the campaign trail as substitutes for Chavez. In fact, the President named Jorge Rodriguez to run his amendment referendum campaign, despite his considerable responsibilities as the incoming mayor of the Liberator Borough of Caracas municipality. Rodriguez appears to have been chosen for his unconditional loyalty to the President given that he spearheaded the unsuccessful effort to win public approval of Chavez's constitutional reform package in December 2007.

BURNING PARTISAN BRIDGES

15. (C) Chavez has rejected entreaties from opposition politicians to engage and mend political divides following

CARACAS 00001777 002.2 OF 003

the November elections. Instead, the President has overseen the continued legal harassment of the opposition's leading figure, Maracaibo mayor Manuel Rosales. Rosales was summoned to give testimony to a prosecutor on December 11, and could face arrest on corruption charges. He has also allowed outgoing PSUV governors and mayors whose seats were won by opposition politicians to sack the offices they are vacating, leaving their successors ill-equipped to conduct public services as basic as trash collection -- problems that often disproportionately affect his poor supporters. Chavez has offered few concrete solutions to the skyrocketing crime rate, unemployment, and the looming economic crisis, instead twisting statistics and using public relations ploys to dodge responsibility.

EXERCISING THE MACHINE

16. (C) Chavez's perpetual campaigning also provides him with a method of testing and stoking his United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) electoral "machine" and maintaining an energized and faithful cadre of supporters. Rather than genuine grass-roots political parties, Chavez's series of political bodies, including the Fifth Republic Movement (MVR), and more recently, the PSUV, really function as top-down mass electoral organizations. The Venezuelan president has made it clear to Chavista officials that their political survival rests squarely on their ability to deliver votes for his amendment proposal. Just as he did in the 2006 presidential election, Chavez is setting the outsized goal of 10 million votes. He won 7.3 million votes in 2006, but polled only 4 million and his PSUV candidates only 5.4 million votes, respectively, in the 2007 constitutional referendum and the 2008 state and local election. The opposition generally polls a little over 4 million votes.

17. (C) In addition, referenda in Venezuela have assisted Chavez and his supporters in determining -- as well as

extorting -- political loyalties. The Venezuelan government continues to use the signatures used to launch the 2004 recall referendum against Chavez to discriminate in the apportionment of government jobs, loans, contracts and other benefits. In an economy dominated by the public sector, the "Tascon list" has served as a powerful tool of political intimidation. Chavez personally launched a signature drive that coincides with the National Assembly's efforts to sponsor the referendum on eliminating presidential term limits. Local pundits believe this effort, which the PSUV claims has gathered close to five million signatures, may serve in the future as a "reverse Tascon list." Embassy has heard numerous, credible reports of Venezuelan government entities pressuring government job-holders and service-seekers to sign.

COMMENT

18. (C) Local pundits often note that President Chavez is a far more effective campaigner than administrator. Continual and polarizing elections have allowed Chavez to avoid appearing responsible for Venezuela's accumulating problems. They have also allowed Chavez to lay claim to democratic legitimacy, despite the lack of separation of powers and his authoritarian style of governing. Nevertheless, Chavez's perpetual campaign formula for political success may be wearing thin on all but the President's most ardent supporters. He suffered his first electoral loss after a string of eleven wins, in the December 2007 reform referendum, in which the elimination of presidential term limits was a key component. Chavez's PSUV party dominated the November 23 state and local elections, but ceded ground to the opposition in five key governorships (up from two in 2004).

19. (C) Chavez is taking a big political risk in pressing for the referendum on presidential term limits and gambling that he and his supporters can mobilize more voters than they did in the December 2007 referendum. Judging from the extent to which Chavez is already personally engaged in this referendum campaign and putting state resources, including mandatory "cadena" broadcasts, behind the "Yes" campaign, the Venezuelan president is well aware that the outcome of this referendum is not a foregone conclusion (at least not in a generally free and fair election). Whatever the outcome of the February or March 2009 referendum, Chavez is likely to

CARACAS 00001777 003.2 OF 003

continue with his permanent campaign strategy in the coming years. Nation-wide municipal council elections are slated for the second half of 2009 and parliamentary elections by the end of 2010.

CAULFIELD